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A Comment on “The War-Prayer”: Mark Twain “Never Ceased to Grow”

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Let me quote at the start two passages from *The Innocents Abroad*. The first one is from an early chapter; the *Quaker City* having left New York a week or so ago:

. . . The executive officer said the Pilgrims had no charity.

There they are, down there every night at eight bells, praying for fair winds—when they know as well as I do that this is the only ship going east this time of the year, but there’s a thousand coming west—what’s a fair wind for us is a head-wind to them—the Almighty’s blowing a fair wind for a thousand vessels, and this tribe wants him to turn it clear around so as to accommodate one, —and she a steamship at that! It ain’t good sense, it ain’t good reason, it ain’t good Christianity, it ain’t common human charity. Avast with such nonsense! (I: 30)

Prayer, a Christian’s pious act of communion with God, can be a self-serving request at the cost of other people.

The other passage is found much later. The Pilgrims are in Palestine:

In an hour we reached Nain, where Christ raised the widow’s son to life. . . . A little mosque stands upon the spot which tradition says was occupied by the widow’s dwelling. Two or three aged Arabs sat about its door. We entered, and the pilgrims broke specimens from the foundation walls, though they had to touch, and even step, upon the “prayer-carpets” to do it. It was almost the same as breaking pieces from the hearts of those old Arabs. To step rudely upon the sacred praying-mats, with booted feet—a thing not done by any Arab—was to inflict pain upon men who had not offended us in any way. Suppose a party of armed foreigners were to enter a village church in America and break ornaments from the altar-railings for curiosities, and climb up and walk upon the Bible and the pulpit cushions? However, the cases are different. One is the profanation of a temple of our own—the other only the profanation of a pagan one. (279)

Here the Pilgrims are less innocuous; they infringe on what others, of “pagan” faith, deem as sacred and are totally unaware what it feels like to be treated that way.

It is easy to see that the keen sensibility to religious hypocrisy and arrogance that informs these two passages is also at work in “The War-Prayer,” which Mark Twain wrote after nearly forty years in 1905. However, in contrast with these scattered, mildly satiric

glances at the foibles of fellow American tourists of religious bent, the Twain of the later piece gets far more serious about similar spurious pieties that are found among his church-going compatriots.

“The War-Prayer” is a parable of the Philippine-American War, by which the United States crushed the Filipino people’s armed struggle for independence and possessed the archipelago. The war was officially announced to have ended on July the Fourth (!) of 1902, but Zwick, who edited practically all of Mark Twain’s writings on that war, tells us that “regional guerrilla warfare and sporadic rebellions continued well into the next decade” (xviii). In this very topical piece, the young volunteers and their proud families who pack the church on Sunday heartily endorse the fervent prayer for merciless fighting and victory the pastor offers from the pulpit. Here too, though, one’s gain can be another’s loss. An aged stranger, who comes in from nowhere and calls himself the messenger of God, tells the wondering congregation the unspoken supplications hidden in the “War-Prayer,” part of which runs:

“O Lord, our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst. . . . We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge an friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.” (159-60)

According to Eric Foner, “Nearly 200,000 U.S. troops fought to suppress the independence movement, killing 16,000 to 20,000 Filipino soldiers. . . . Hundreds of thousands of civilians died from war-related famine and disease. Racism heightened the war’s brutality” (152). The stranger’s graphic description of the consequences the prayer may bring to one of “the people who sit in darkness” is a historically fairly accurate report of what had been going on in Luzon for several years.

The bitterly ironic closing words don’t end the parable. The stranger then asks the audience if they still ask God to grant their prayer. Predictably, they aren’t a bit moved.

It was believed afterwards, that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said. (160)

Just about complete is the disclosure of the role some churches played in exploiting the hypocritical and arrogant trends among the faithful in order to promote a war of invasion, and it is to the credit of Mark Twain the writer and man that he took the giant stride from making passing jibes at these trends in his first travel book to writing at the age of 70 a powerful satire of imperialist America—satire so powerful that *Harper's* rejected it at the time and only published it posthumously in 1923. In Edgar M. Branch's memorable words, Mark Twain, in matters of social criticism, "never ceased to grow" (185).

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